

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the applications:

**Listing of Claims:**

Claims 1-20 (canceled)

21. (Currently Amended) An isolated polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression, wherein ~~said the~~ polynucleotide comprises ~~a the continuous~~ nucleic acid sequence ~~of consisting of nucleotides~~ 181-341 of SEQ ID NO: 1 ~~having including one~~ thymidine inserted between position 206 and 207 of SEQ ID NO: 1, ~~or a fragment thereof that includes said thymidine, wherein the polynucleotide or the fragment and~~ enhances protein expression when incorporated downstream of an expression regulatory promoter sequence and upstream of a protein coding sequence.

22. (Currently Amended) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, ~~wherein said nucleic acid sequence~~ which enhances said protein expression by increasing translation of the mRNA encoding said protein.

23. (Currently Amended) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, ~~wherein said nucleic acid sequence~~ which enhances said protein expression by increasing IRES activity.

Claims 24-25 (canceled).

26. (Previously Presented) An isolated polynucleotide consisting of the nucleotide sequence as set forth in SEQ ID NO: 7 over its entire length.

27. (canceled)

28. (Currently Amended) An expression vector comprising ~~an the~~ isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or claim ~~[[24]]~~ 26.

29. (Previously Presented) An isolated host cell transformed or transfected with the vector according to claim 28.

30. (Currently Amended) A method of expressing a protein *in vitro*, comprising the steps of:

(a) transforming or transfecting an isolated host cell with the expression vector ~~according to claim 53 comprising both the isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or 26 and a protein coding sequence operably inserted downstream of the polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression~~, and

(b) growing the host cell in a medium under conditions where the cell expresses the protein.

31. (Previously Presented) The method according to claim 30, wherein the method further comprises, after step (b), a step of isolating the protein from the cell and/or the growth medium.

32. (canceled)

33. (Previously Presented) A probe for screening substances that interact with IRES, comprising the polynucleotide according to claim 26, further comprising a detectable label.

34. (Previously Presented) A probe for screening IRES-dependent translation inhibitors, comprising the polynucleotide according to claim 26, further comprising a detectable label.

35. (Currently Amended) A composition comprising the isolated polynucleotide ~~for enhancing protein expression~~ according to claim 21.

36. (Currently Amended) A composition comprising the isolated polynucleotide ~~for enhancing protein expression~~ according to claim ~~[[24]]~~ 26.

37. (Currently Amended) A method for determining a hypervirulent hepatitis C strain, comprising the steps of:

(a) screening a biological sample for the presence of the polynucleotide according to claim 26, and;

(b) determining presence or absence of the hypervirulent hepatitis C strain from the screening step, wherein the presence of the polynucleotide identifies the hypervirulent

hepatitis C strain in the biological sample and the absence of said sequence indicates the absence of said hypervirulent hepatitis C.

38. (Currently Amended) An isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, further comprising the continuous nucleotides consisting of nucleotides 1-180 of SEQ ID NO: 1.

39. (Currently Amended) An isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or 38, further comprising the continuous nucleotides consisting of nucleotides 342-713 of SEQ ID NO: 1.

Claims 40-43 (cancelled)

44. (Currently Amended) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or ~~[[24]]~~ 26 ~~which further comprises comprising a nucleic acid sequence continuous nucleotides~~ for enhancing protein expression, wherein a 5'-untranslated region of the ~~nucleic acid sequence continuous nucleotides~~ comprises a polynucleotide nucleotide sequence corresponding to at least one region selected from the group consisting of pyrimidine-rich tract, Box A, Box B, a trans factor-binding site, and a combination thereof.

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45. (Currently Amended) An isolated polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression, wherein said ~~the~~ polynucleotide comprises ~~[[a]] the nucleotide sequence of set out in SEQ ID NO: 7 over its entire length, nucleotides 181-341 of SEQ ID NO: 1 having one thymidine inserted between position 206 and 207 of SEQ ID NO: 1 or a fragment thereof that includes said thymidine, and wherein said nucleic acid sequence and~~ has a substitution, deletion, insertion, and/or addition of a single or a few nucleotides taken from a gene of wild type virus within the sequence or proximate sequence in at least one position corresponding to a pyrimidine-rich tract, Box A, Box B, and/or trans factor-binding site contained in ~~said nucleic acid sequence~~ the polynucleotide.

Claims 46-48 (canceled)

49. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein the 5'-untranslated region comprises an AUG or ATG sequence.

50. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein the 5'-untranslated region comprises a part or an entire region of IRES of viral mRNA.

51. (Currently Amended) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein said ~~nucleic acid sequence~~ continuous nucleotides further comprises a portion of a coding region taken from a viral gene adjacent to the 5'-untranslated region.

52. (Currently Amended) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim [[24]] 26, wherein said ~~nucleic acid~~ nucleotide sequence is a cDNA sequence.

53. (Previously Presented) An expression vector according to claim 28, further comprising a protein coding sequence operably inserted downstream of the polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression.

54. (canceled)

55. (Currently Amended) An expression vector comprising a promoter sequence, ~~a polypeptide encoding sequence, a protein coding sequence and a nucleic acid sequence of the nucleotide sequence set out in SEQ ID NO: 7 over its entire length~~ incorporated downstream of the promoter sequence and upstream of ~~the polynucleotide encoding protein coding sequence~~, wherein the ~~nucleic acid~~ nucleotide sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7 enhances expression of the ~~polypeptide protein coding region~~ by means of increasing IRES activity.

56. (Currently Amended) The expression vector according to claim 55, ~~wherein said vector~~ which is a vector for expression in eukaryotic cells.

Claims 57-65 (canceled)